

Beyond Dumont – Sumit Guha’s *Beyond Caste*

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Sumit Guha’s book *Beyond Caste. Identity and Power in South Asia. Past and Present*¹ has been described by Nathaniel Roberts as the “most important synoptic study of caste since Louis Dumont’s *Homo Hierarchicus*.”² Dumont’s study, originally published in French in 1966, is a book on which generations of students of contemporary South Asia have been educated. Dumont researched relations and practices of exclusion between castes in certain Indian villages, and offered some clear-cut conclusions about the caste system that spanned various periods and regions. He claimed, among other things, that unlike the Christian world, in Hindu society the individual is only perceived as a part of the world and his society, and that religion and priests (belonging to the Brahman social class) were crucial for the upkeep of the traditional social

¹ Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste. Identity and Power in South Asia. Past and Present*, Permanent Black, New Delhi 2016, 291 pp. I have read the 2016 edition. The original came out in 2013.

² Nathaniel Roberts, “Setting Caste Back on Its Feet,” *Anthropology of This Century*, May 2015, <http://aotcpress.com/articles/setting-caste-feet/> (last retrieved 12 March 2016).

order, including the caste system, so that in a traditional Indian state there was a distinct division of labor between the king (regarding whom the Brahman priest was subordinate in material affairs) and the Brahman priest (regarding whom the king was subordinate regarding spiritual issues).³ Since Dumont, caste has been mainly perceived from this religious and ritual-related perspective. Dumont's focus was partly based on the notion of purity that sets the castes apart, and on *jajmānī*, the system of local exchange of services that functioned around a main ritual, the priest who performs it and its patron (the *jajmān*). Moreover, Hindu religious traditions (as well as some of its philosophical traits) offer justifications for the caste system.

Authors like Guha have shifted the focus from the ritual-religious perspective to a political-economic one. A number of researchers had already earlier argued that the discourse on the caste system should be centered on power rather than religion; these included, among others, Hocart, Dirks, Bayly or Appadurai (p. 45). Below, this reviewer discusses Guha's research and disagrees with some of its conclusions, but supports the main focus on power. Communities in South Asia, Guha summarizes, were "always political" (p. 209). I could also add here Quigley's remark that we should not speak of the caste system as such, but rather of many "political units" which are divided into various castes.⁴ Such observations should warn us against any essentialization that speak of one caste system across regions and generations. Caste should be (and nowadays is) understood locally, even though its overall patterns should be searched for. Moreover, Guha has very strongly argued that Dumont had often arrived at his conclusions without producing satisfying source materials, or even by ignoring the ones he

³ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1980, 259, 286.

⁴ Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993, p. 16.

had had at hand.

The first chapter deals with the linguistic notion of caste and how it influenced our understanding of this phenomenon. Guha points out that all foreign groups had seen Indian society through their lenses. While Ibn Battuta perceived South Asian communities as similar to Arabic tribes (p. 32), the Portuguese used the term *casta* for Indian groups as at they were at this time “evolving a system of ethnic and social stratification by biological ancestry; it was for this reason that they immediately assumed that Indian *jātis* aimed exclusively at maintaining ‘purity of blood’” (p. 27).

The second chapter “suggests that imperial kingship at the beginning of the second millennium CE dealt with strong local organizations of peasants worthies who formed dominant caste blocs across the countryside. These locally dominant groups enforced hierarchy by direct action” (pp. 20-21). In another instance, throughout the book the readers are reminded that just as the notion of purity did not have as profound an influence on the caste system as Dumont had suggested, power was both more influential and more dynamic. The caste system was not static, and various communities kept struggling for the space and privileges within it. These processes included negotiating with the state.

The third chapter deals with the political economy of the Indian village. Here, two systems are mentioned: *jajmānī* and the “village servant system.” Both are a form of customary exchange of services in kind between various members of society. Guha calls the latter one *balutā* (from Marathi) (p. 117). It was a “secular” system in the sense that the exchange itself was not based on any religious traditions. Dumont, however, believed that the “village servant system” was “a special caste” of the *jajmānī*, in which these gifts in kind supported the enactment of a ritual (p. 114). Thus, the ritual, according to Dumont, was a focal point of the village’s political economy, as it was through it that services were distributed. Offering a strong rebuttal of Dumont’s claim, Guha points to

Fukuzawa's research in Maharashtra showing that "the functionaries were maintained by the village as a territorial whole – thus conforming to the 'village servant' rather the *jajmānī* type of relation" (p. 124). *Jajmānī* functioned beside it, not incorporated into it: "Brahmans functioning as priests sometimes had exclusive claims to specific castes or lineages, but not the village as a whole" (p. 124). Thus, it was *jajmānī* that was far more widespread and static than has been suggested (p. 117). Moreover, Dumont, Guha claims, "cites only one primary source" while trying to prove that *balutā* was "a special case" of the *jajmānī* system. That source was the *Report on the Village Communities of the Deccan* and, as Guha sums up, it "would appear that Dumont's research did not go beyond the front cover of this short booklet" (p. 114). Yet again, it appears that religion and ritual were not as central as Dumont had assumed.

The fourth chapter deals with how military-fiscal regimes in India changed and influenced the character of families while penetrating the local communities. The fifth shows how the states of eighteenth-century India collected information on their communities, and how caste become an element of a state's knowledge and policy. The sixth and last one deals with how the East India Company dealt with castes, and the observations from this and earlier periods are eventually extended into the realities of the present Republic of India. Guha shows how in the realities of the democratic are influenced by caste politics. "Numbers counted now," so "[h]ierarchies were flattened in order to create effective, integrated pressure groups" (p. 254). The castes and communities were therefore able to join hands above their divides to form political blocs, such as the KHAM coalition in Gujarat (pp. 246-247). Nonetheless, I should stress the book does not focus primarily on modern India.

Otherwise, however, the work is based on a rich primary source material, although Guha's main area remains western India (nowadays Maharashtra); regions like South India are far less represented. Sources in Hindustani/Hindi "and closely related languages" (p. 257) are fewer,

and the sources in Sanskrit and Persian seem to be mainly in English translation. My only doubt, therefore, is whether Guha's conclusions apply to regions like South India in the same way. In some cases, he does qualify them, adding, for example, that the reason why it was first in South India that the politics of backward castes had succeeded decades before it started to happen in North India was because South and West India had a strong tradition of a Brahman scribal class, against which the lower groups rebelled throughout 20th-century politics. In what is now Uttar Pradesh in northern India, however, Indian official classes had been "less powerful and more diverse" (p. 230).

As seen earlier, Guha is often blunt, and Dumont is not the sole object of his attacks. Nevertheless, the reasons for his criticisms in my opinion justify their harshness. For example, referring to V.M. Dandekar's and M.M. Jagtap's studies on villages in Maharashtra and praising their research, Guha bitterly adds in a footnote: "These intensive team studies of a scientifically selected sample of villages are significantly more dependable than the assortments of single villages in various regions at various times from which the anthropological models have been typically been constructed. But then these were written by Indians in an Indian language" (Guha, 134). Here, he rightly points out an unfortunately common situation in which a number of non-Indians pursue research on India without any knowledge of its language(s), and yet have a tendency to promptly arrive at conclusions.

Altogether, Sumit Guha's research is painstaking, his conclusions are important for every scholar dealing with the social and political processes of India (not just the caste system and such) and the book's straightforward message should serve as a wake-up call for all those that have been taking Indian society and Indian non-English primary sources for granted